

Q: Good afternoon. Today is February 17th, 2017. My name is Kim Hewitt and I am here at the Wingate Residences at Boylston Place with Sam Starobin. Together we're participating in the Newton Talks Oral History Project that is being conducted with the Newton Free Library, Historic Newton, and the Newton Senior Center. So, Sam, can you tell us about your connection to Newton?

A: To Newton?

Q: Yes.

A: Well, as I said, very marginal. As a matter of fact, I think this is the first time I'm living in Newton. Before I lived in Brookline for a considerable number of years.

Q: When did you move to Newton?

A: I guess when we entered here, which was about three years ago.

Q: Three years?

 : Yes, and Brookline for a number of years.

Q: What were you doing--

 : It was about two and a half years ago.

Q: Okay, great. What were you doing before you entered the service and what was life like for you before you entered the service?

A: That's a good question. I was not born in this country. I was born in Russia. And I came to this country in 1928, which was a time of Depression, the Depression had just started, so it was hard scrabble. And I moved to Milwaukee where the majority of our large family on my mother's side lived. And let's see, when did I encounter the war? Well, when I finished high school I had a problem where to go to college. I couldn't afford the tuition, but I got a scholarship to the University of Chicago, so I was at the University of Chicago when the war broke out.

I remember sitting, I lived in a small student co-op that we ran ourselves, and sitting in the living room on a Sunday when Pearl Harbor came. And we knew our lives were changed, but we didn't know how. I went in and enlisted on the basis that I could continue college and until they needed me. Well, in April, 1943 they needed me and they sent me down to Basic Training at Camp Wallace in Texas.

Texas was a favorite spot for setting up training camps, because it had so many desolate spots that nobody else wanted. Later on they discovered oil there, but at that time it was just a swamp.

Q: Okay. Why did you choose that specific branch and what branch?

A: Well, I enlisted in the Army. That's what you did. Not in the Navy, not in the Air Force. As a matter of fact there was no Air Force at that time, there was just an Army Air Corps, so I enlisted in the Army. It was just the thing to do.

Q: What did you miss most about home besides family and friends?

A: Nothing. [Laughter] Family and friends was it.

Q: So how did you adapt to military life, including like the physical regimen, barracks, food, social life?

A: It amazed me. I adapted immediately. I loved it. I loved the regimen. I loved the marching. And I loved the unrecognized regimen of trying to get out of things.

Q: Can you tell us more about that?

A: Well, specifically I remember one afternoon looking at the bulletin board and it said that later that day there would be a 20 mile march at night, and next to it was an announcement that that afternoon there would be interviews for West Point. So, I'm thinking I'm going to that. They can't deny me the right to. So I went and was interviewed and forgot about it. Life went on. And then one afternoon a Sargent came to the barracks and said, "Starobin, pack your bags," which was very unusual, because at my pay rate, the lowest, we didn't move separately. We were not recognized as individuals. We moved in packs.

So I asked him, "Where am I going?" "You're going to," Let's see, what was the college?

 : Amherst?

A: "You're going to Amherst College in Massachusetts." "And what am I going to do there?" And they, "You're going to prep for West Point." As a matter of fact, just to give you a background, appointments to West Point are mainly political. Every Congressman has some, every Senator has some. I had no Congressmen, no Senators, but the Army had a number of appointments, and 120 were available that year or the next year. So they chose 360 to make sure that the candidates were able to pass the entrance exam. Generally the Army's people are not too well educated, so they put three times as many, but of the 360 young men who showed up five out of six had been to college, so it was the academics were not particularly a problem.

In any case I showed up at Amherst and that was a bad year, taking high school level courses, and then came to the end of the year, took the exam. I passed, of course. And off to West Point. I remember we came in at the railroad station, we marched up the hill, and our lives changed. We walked up as individuals, suddenly we became nonentities, raw material to be molded and into a new form, and got to the top of the hill where we were met by West Point upperclassmen who said, "Drop your bag. Pick up your bag. Tuck your chin in." I said, "My god, what's going on here?" But I quickly found that is the regimen for newcomers. That was the first day.

The next day was a holiday, so we were allowed to relax. I said, "Well thank god that's over with. I can't take much more of this." Well I took much more, a year.

Q: So where exactly did you serve? And do you remember arriving and what it was like?

A: Well, after graduating from West Point in 1947 we then went to two other training camps and then I was assigned to the Far East, to Japan. I had just married and I didn't want my early marriage to be interrupted by war, so I decided to go to the Far East, which seemed more trouble-free than Europe. Was I wrong. I landed in Japan in 1948. In 1950 the Korean War broke out and I was in Korea within a week. We were pushed back to a small perimeter around the one port and then MacArthur showed his brilliance and did the end around. Korea is a peninsula and we were crowded down into the southeast corner of it around the one port halfway up the peninsula, and then an amazing thing happened. The enemy did not withdraw, they disappeared. Suddenly they were, one day they were there, the next day they were gone.

So, we drove carelessly up to the northern capital, Yongdong Po. I remember being in Yongdong Po and in the big ceremonial buildings that they built there were the pictures of the Dictator still on the wall, and now, as I say, Korea is a peninsula, but it has an attachment to a continent and that attachment is very mountainous. Those mountains serve for electric generating plants, but

the power did not go into South Korea, which was not industrialized, it went to Manchuria which was industrialized by the Communists that had taken over China just the year before. This was 1950. They had conquered China in 1949. Therefore they had an interest in those plants.

So, when they got up, when they invaded the peninsula of Korea and McArthur did the end around, and we thought the war was over. Well, the war would have been over if we McArthur had not, had not exceeded, he cut off more than he could chew. If he had stayed away from the attachment to the continent that would have been it. The Communists did not care about Korea. They cared about the hydroelectric plants.

I was an Intelligence Officer encountering a line crosser. He looked like a peasant, peasant clothing, but he told me he was headed back to report to headquarters that the hills were, that the mountains there were full of Chinese troops. Well, McArthur, he gets that news, maybe he'll slow down, maybe he won't push it. He didn't. As a result we went into those hills, the enemy sat on the mountains and watched us, and then one day they just came down and they cut off the troops that were headed out. We lost a regiment of troops and we didn't see them again until after the war. Later I found to my satisfaction that McArthur wanted a war with China. We had the bomb, they did not, and he figured, I guess he figured we would catch them at the birthing moment and kill them in the cradle. It didn't work that way.

So, let's see. I'll wrap up this particular episode. We had awakened a sleeping giant. They didn't care about the continents as long as we didn't hurt, the peninsula, as long as we didn't pose a threat to their regime. We had presented that threat and so they decided to take all of Korea. They cut off our probing troops. We didn't see them again until after the war. And they pushed us down halfway to the-- I forget the parallel where we then fought the war for the next three years, lost 100,000.

Q: Can you tell us about a few of your most memorable experiences, whether they were positive or negative?

A: Well, I was a Company Commander. We were holding the line in Korea. I was, my engineer company was in support of an infantry regiment. We were halfway down on the peninsula. The enemy had not yet attacked us. The regiment commander called me and he said, "The enemy is breaking through on our left. We have to go and support them. You hold the town." Well, I immediately scrambled to find a place that was defensible and while I was checking that out the first mortar shell hit, hit about 10 feet away. I remember running around in a circle until I caught my bearings and then went up to the troops.

We pulled out of that, we pulled out of, we were ordered to pull out of that, because it was indefensible, and went on our way to join the rest of the regiment which was about 10 miles away. We were caught in an ambush. I remember leading my troops in a Jeep and on the road, the roads there were very narrow. There were no getting off the roads. They were built up, because the rest of the land was patty land. And on the road was a truck, couldn't get by it. Suddenly a man came up out of the land, got in the truck, and drove away. I should have been savvy enough to recognize this was an ambush. I didn't. I was still green.

So, he was out of the way. I continued maybe a hundred feet and the machine guns were put on us. Blew away a tire out of my Jeep. Didn't kill anyone, didn't hurt anyone. And then the machine gunner got up and left. He was all by himself. In the meantime he created a bit of chaos. That was my first encounter with the enemy. After that it settled down and we drove on and joined the regiment, and came, was in the perimeter, and awaited the rest of the war.

Q: So, did you serve anywhere after Korea?

A: Yes. I returned to the United States, had an assignment in Europe and then returned to the Far East for the Vietnamese War.

Q: Do you recall the day your service ended?

A: When I left the Army? Well, that was, that is a very complicated story. This was I think 1968. In 1968 there was a Presidential Inaugural and I was appointed to help plan that Inaugural. It was a complicated process. And I did quite well on that, so after the Inaugural they were just forming the government of the District of Columbia. The District of Columbia is a creature of Congress and the type of government they have is set by Congress. Well, I as an Army Officer was assigned to help them deal with the Inaugural. Evidently I did it well, because they then appointed me in a civilian office in the District of Columbia government. So here I was an Army Officer serving in a civilian function.

I took to that very well, thankfully. Then they told me, "You've got to choose," because I was holding a high rank in the civilian government was waiting for me, but I was in the Army. Well, there were contenders for that spot, so they, "Choose." So, I went and left the Army, departed from the Army, became a civilian. I went back to the same job as before. So, the transition was easy.

Q: Okay. So what was it like when you returned to civilian life? You said it was easy, but did you find any issues?

A: Well, I had left the security of the Army where everything is regulated to the wild west form of government in District of Columbia where there were many contending factions, and particularly many ambitious individuals. So, I had to learn to survive.

Q: So how did your service and experiences affect your life and your outlook on war and the military in general?

A: Well, as I look back on that, my service, I realized that the war was really to no purpose. People were getting killed. We won a battle here, we lost one there. But it missed the point and the point was that the people of Korea wanted to govern themselves. And our pretensions that we were protecting them was sort of we'll destroy the country to protect it, and very specifically we were, the Army was engaged in a struggle with the North Korean Army, the North Vietnamese Army at this point. The Air Force wanted action, so they're bombing. They didn't know what they were bombing, because the jungle growth was so dense that they didn't see what had happened. They wanted to revel in their destruction, so they decided to deal with it, obscuring growth, so they started spraying Agent Orange. Agent Orange is a neurologic agent and I was affected, I am still affected by that Agent Orange. I have Parkinson's.

But the idea that anything goes as long as it's your mission and we'll define what the mission is, our mission is to bomb, we want to bomb, I'm suffering from that, but the people of Korea--

 : Of Vietnam.

A: --The people of Vietnam are suffering much, much more. They have left a devastation of sickness. We have left a devastation.

Q: Do you want to finish your thought?

A: I have.

Q: Okay. Can you tell us about your time in Germany?

A: Well, I went to Germany in 1956, I believe, as a regular assignment. I was assigned as an Engineer Officer to an engineer regiment, but I had been there only about six months when I was given a totally new assignment that gave me a completely new career. This was a time of great tension with Russia. The question was not are they going to attack, when are they going to attack. The French were part of the Western Coalition and bailed out. De Gaulle and his ambitions did not permit him to accept anyone as his superior, so they bailed out. So, where do we get the troops? So, they decided to start the new German Army. I was assigned to that mission. So I worked with the Germans for two and a half years on that assignment, and then returned for another three years.

Q: What was that like for you?

A: Well, when I was first appointed to that I said, "Here I am a Jewish boy assigned to teaching the Germans how to fight. I don't need it." Well, they came back and said, "You do what you're told." And so that started a very interesting career and a very interesting phase of my life. I got to know the Germans very well. I served in support of a division. I was assigned to work with an engineer battalion of that division, which is a very friendly association.

Q: Are there any other experiences you want to share with us today?

A: Let's see. I can't think of any.

Q: What would you like people to know a hundred years from now?

A: That war is a futile enterprise and it is hard to resist, but must be resisted. There are better ways of solving our problems than war.

Q: Thank you for taking the time to do this with us today. We're really happy to be able to include you in the Newton Talks Oral History Project. And that's it.

A: Thank you.

 : After formally finishing their interview the participant shared another story which will follow without introduction here.

A: One of my most interesting experiences was to meet the man who had fought on the German side and had broken, and had been one of the people to break the National Line. He led-- The National Line was a series of underground fortifications. The only thing that popped up were firing positions, toadstools and mushrooms. And the French had built such a line and then the Belgians had extended that line. They figured that line would hold the Germans. It didn't. They broke through in one day. And how did they do that? The entire line was underground except for firing positions, and then behind the lines was a central control center that was also underground, but in [00:29:05]. The Germans sent a company of troops in by helicopter, by glider. They landed behind the lines. They broke into that and the fortifications were just built to hold the enemy not forever hopefully but for many days, fell immediately. They captured the control center and the line had to collapse.

I met the man who commanded that German enterprise. Very interesting man. And discussing it with him was a high point in my career.

Q: Oh wow. Do you remember his name?

A: I'm 93 years old. [Laughter] And things like names are fading into the mist.

Q: Is there anything else you want to add while we're still going?

A: He invaded behind the enemy lines and they disappeared. So, we went down the road and like a Sunday picnic. My division ended up in a port city of-- I forgot the name, but it was in the west side of the Korean peninsula. It was a seaport and it was in trouble. It was mined. So, our ships could not enter, but the mines had been laid using local fishermen, so they sent me out with the local fishermen who had laid the mines to tell our mine layering forces we had a mine layer, a mine sweeper waiting outside, and my mission was to take this man to the mine sweeper, have him pass on information where they had placed the mines. And so we went chugging through the minefields and he and an interpreter went out. And when we returned-- What is it?

 : I think about going aboard the Navy ship.

A: Well, when we got to the Naval ship, which was the mine sweepers, a small ship, the local fisherman and his interpreter went off and they invited me to join them at meals. Well, meals, of course, for troops is opening a can, no big deal, but here on this Naval ship you sat down and at the table with a tablecloth, and there are people serving you. I said, "Am I in the same service with these guys?" In any case, that defined, I was a groundhogger, they were in their own world.

Well, let's see what else might be of interest to you.

 : Well, he said he thought to himself, "Are they fighting the same war?" They were all clean and he was filthy. [Laughter]

A: Well, my episode in South Vietnam raised questions about McArthur and his system. As I said, the troops in South Korea, our troops in South Korea had taken out of South Korea except for the northernmost part which was attached to the continent. The Chinese Communists who had taken over just the year before, they had taken over China in 1949, this was 1950, they-- It was ambiguous what they were going to do about Korea.

So, when he, when McArthur decreed that we would send troops, forces up and capture the capital of North Korea, to capture, to go in and capture the rest of Korea which had an extensive holding on the continent that puts question of what the Communists felt was theirs. And they had troops up in the hills of North Korea, because they said there were electric generating plants that sent their power to Manchuria. McArthur contested that by sending these forces into that area and endangering the Communist hold on those mountains. Well, they soon made the position clear, we don't give a damn about Korea, but we do want these mountains with these electric generating plants.

Now I wonder how did McArthur not know that this was happening? And then it was later that it became clear he knew what was happening, he counted on it happening, and he then intended to go to war with China, and China's Communists had captured China just the year before, captured them and killed the regime, you might say, in its crib. The result was a standoff at the highest level between McArthur and Truman, a little episode, so they were to meet at an island in the Pacific. McArthur was to fly in. McArthur got there first and he should have landed and awaited Truman. He told his pilot, "Keep circling until Truman lands and he will greet me." That gave, that led to McArthur's being fired.

Q: Did you find this all out after when you were doing research on your own?

A: I couldn't understand it at first, believe it or not. I did some research. The result is McArthur was fired. But he had, McArthur had been a little Emperor. He had been in Japan. He was, he told the Emperor of Japan what to do. And it went to his head. Of course McArthur had always been raised in an atmosphere of you are the most brilliant man alive. When he went to West Point his mother was there, making sure he would get the proper information. He came from a noted military family. So, he had the ego to stand up to a President and lose. Alright, thank you.

Q: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW